

MOBILE MEALS TOOLKIT: MEAL SERVICE LOGISTICS AND BEST PRACTICES



Introduction

This resource is designed to support summer meals program sponsors in the development and implementation of a successful mobile meals delivery and service solution in their communities. The following guidance assumes that a thorough analysis of the feasibility of mobile meals programming has already occurred and that site selection and community partnership efforts are well underway. In this section of the toolkit, we will cover the “nuts and bolts” of getting meals out of the kitchen and into the community.

This resource is broken into four parts:

- [Part One](#) shares best practices and **key considerations for meal preparation**. This includes guidance on choosing to prepare meals internally versus sourcing them externally from a vendor, as well as guidance on serving hot versus cold meals.
- [Part Two](#) shares **best practices for service delivery**, including vehicle and routing options, community outreach, and managing demand.
- [Part Three](#) covers **program staffing** and related best practices.
- [Part Four](#) addresses **community considerations**, including outreach, additional programming, and managing demand.



Part One: Preparing Meals for Service

The type of meals, selected meal delivery model and anticipated meal service environment are key elements that need to be considered when planning your program. For example, who will make and package the food – your organization or a vendor? Additionally, will your program feature cold meals, hot meals, or a combination of the two? Will meals served at sites be completely unitized or will offer-versus-serve (OVS) be utilized?

These key decisions require prior planning and should be based on the following criteria:

- The infrastructure of your organization and those of your partners
 - The resources you have at your disposal
 - Your knowledge of what would work best in the community
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Regardless of the path you choose, meals prepared for service must satisfy all USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) federal [meal pattern requirements](#) and be served in a [congregate setting](#) in order to be eligible for reimbursement. Additionally, for cost containment purposes, the per-meal price should not exceed the reimbursement rate for that meal.

Preparing Meals: Internal (Self-Prep) or Vended?

Internal Food Preparation

Requirements: USDA regulations concerning food procurement must be followed with proper documentation on file. Preparing meals in-house requires access to a licensed kitchen and a food prep facility meeting health code regulations.

Planning and Budgeting: Bulk food purchasing, which can help keep costs low, requires access to storage space and refrigeration. Building relationships with local farmers, food retailers, or distributors may allow for additional product variety and decreased food costs. If you have a relationship with your local school food service director, consider reaching out for additional direction.

Capacity: Paid or volunteer labor allocation must reflect time spent procuring food items in addition to coordinating food pickup and delivery to the meal prep facility. Often, a program staff person is assigned the responsibility of sourcing, purchasing and picking up food and transporting it to the food prep facility. At the food prep facility, contracted food prep labor (i.e. program staff) or volunteers can prepare food daily (if serving hot meals) or 1-2 times per week (if serving cold meals).

Bottom Line: Self-prepared meals are a great option for program sponsors who are able to prepare and deliver meals. This option provides a much greater level of menu flexibility and gives the sponsor the opportunity to conduct taste tests and incorporate local food items on short notice.

Purchase Meals from a Vendor

Procuring meals from a vendor may be appropriate if one or more of the following apply:

- There is not a dedicated staff or volunteer base to prepare meals
- Licensed kitchen facilities are not readily available
- You have access to a kitchen, but it is located far away from locations where meals will be served
- Cold storage capacity is limited, preventing cost savings through bulk purchasing
- Warm or cold storage capacity is limited, making it difficult to store prepared meals for service
- The estimated per-meal cost of internal food prep is higher than quotes received from a vendor

Food vendors vary in size and type, from small, locally focused catering companies that provide food service only, to regional or national companies that provide both food service and opportunities for greater partnership (i.e. use of vehicles for delivery, co-branding, etc.). Other organizations, such as school districts and food banks, can also act as vendors in addition to sponsoring their own sites.

Consider the following when selecting a vendor for your summer meals program:

- **Order flexibility:** Select a vendor that allows changes to the order within 24 hours ahead of the delivery window, as opposed to days in advance. This allows for greater responsiveness to shifts in demand, which can reduce food waste and unnecessary expenses. Language regarding emergency meal preparation and emergency cancellation should be included in the vendor agreement.
- **Experience serving unitized meals to children:** Select a vendor with the capacity to prepare boxed meals, particularly meals geared toward children. Even if your summer program consists primarily of hot prepared food items delivered through an offer-versus-serve model, expertise preparing boxed meals comes in handy if some of your sites do not fit this model or schedule field trips over the course of the summer. Even though a compliant menu is planned, vendors should have complete understanding of all SFSP meal requirements.
- **Quality of meals:** Children are more likely to be consistent participants in your program if meals are culturally appropriate and reflect their preferences. Cultural preferences should be identified at the outset and incorporated into menu planning so that all children and families are made to feel welcome. During the summer, your vendor should solicit input from participating children as well as site staff regarding food preferences and be willing to modify weekly menus based on feedback received.
- **Volume:** A successful vendor possesses the flexibility, experience, and scale to quickly respond to changes in demand and communicates a clear process for doing so.
- **Familiarity with service area:** Navigating traffic flows and the ability to improvise effectively is especially important when the meal service window is tight or when additional, last-minute deliveries are needed. Timeliness in meal service is required, both to maintain customer service and to ensure that meals served are eligible for reimbursement.

The Process for Selecting a Vendor

The first step in selecting a vendor is to draft a Request for Proposal (RFP) inviting vendors to submit a bid.¹ The RFP spells out details of the contract and outlines clear expectations for both parties – your organization as well as the vendor preparing meals for service. Vendors may be selected based on a range of factors, with primary considerations being per-meal cost (the lower, the better) in addition to the selection criteria described above. This is also your chance to ask about the vendor's ability to provide variety in meal offerings, sample the quality of the food, and check with references.

Pro Tip: Geographic Preference and Local Food

Program sponsors have the option of applying *geographic preference* to encourage vendor procurement of local foods to support their summer meals program. Geographic preference can be used to give preference to vendors who incorporate locally-sourced, unprocessed foods into the program. Please note that the impact of geographic preference on bid evaluation must be clearly outlined in the RFP and fully compliant with [USDA guidance](#). To learn more about developing an effective bid that achieves this and other goals related to meal quality and program excellence, consult the Food Research and Action Center's (FRAC) [summer meals vendor guide](#).

¹ When drafting your bid, be sure to start by reaching out to the administering state agency to inquire whether there are suggested or required RFP templates for use.

Finally, remember that forecasting meal service at new sites is always a challenge and can be especially tricky when starting or expanding a mobile meals program. As a result, when developing your RFP, keep in mind the importance of clear communication with vendors regarding the complexities of your program and strategies to manage excess meal costs. Additionally, it is essential to cultivate effective communication with your selected vendor at all steps of program planning and implementation, including a strategy to navigate last-minute meal service cancellations or other emergencies. In doing so, you can work together as partners to prepare for these stressful situations and mitigate the financial risk you face as the sponsor.

While sponsors may select the vendor, the state agency administering summer meals must approve the vendor and can disqualify certain vendor bids. For more information on the vending process and to receive sample forms, contact your [administering state agency](#).

Vendor Deliverables

All vendors must successfully carry out the following tasks in relation to your mobile meals program:

- Sign and execute a contract with the sponsor for a set per-meal price
- Accept online or phone orders from sponsors
- Produce high-quality, SFSP-compliant meals that support program participation and retention
- Deliver food to site locations for service during scheduled meal times
- Ensure children have what they need to eat meals served (utensils, plates, napkins, etc.)

Bottom Line: Food service vendors are an attractive option for organizations that do not have the capacity to provide meals during the summer. Contracting with a vendor also allows program sponsors to spend more time on other elements of their program, such as outreach or activities. However, for this arrangement to be effective, clear communication and shared expectations are vitally important from the bid process all the way through to meal preparation and delivery. Make sure your RFP reflects organizational priorities and that vendors satisfy their agreed-upon obligations.

Meal Service Format: Hot or Cold?		
	Cold Meals	Hot Meals
Food Cost	Variable: While food items for neither hot nor cold meals are inherently more expensive, it may be more difficult for sponsors serving hot meals to fully benefit from bulk food purchasing arrangements.	
Labor	Less expensive: Cold meals are less time-intensive to prepare and can be prepared in advance. Staff require less training to prepare cold meals for service. Cold, unitized meals may be distributed by program staff, which would not incur a cost to the food service operation.	More expensive: Hot meals are more time-intensive to prepare and must be prepared daily. Staff require more training to prepare and serve hot meals.
Logistics	Less complex: Meals are easier and less costly to transport (i.e. packed	More complex: Meal delivery requires additional space and more expensive

	tightly in coolers). Smaller vehicles may be used for transportation. Easier for children to eat in locations without a table and chairs.	equipment (i.e. hot boxes or pan carriers). Modified/specialized vehicles may be needed for transportation. Difficult for children to eat in locations without a table and chairs.
Child Preference	Less preferred: Cold meals may seem monotonous (even when varied) and lack sensory appeal for children participating in the program.	More preferred: Sponsors often report that participation and retention rates increase at sites implementing hot meal service. A hot meal may be the only one a child receives that day and can expose children to a wider culinary range.
Nutritional Value	Same: Both meal types provide a SFSP compliant nutritious meal.	
Safety	Less complex: Cold meals may be easier to keep at a safe temperature using coolers, ice packs, and other readily available materials.	More complex: Hot meals may be more difficult to keep at a safe temperature using hot boxes and tray carriers that are more expensive to procure and costly to operate.
Food Waste	More opportunities to reduce waste: Unserved cold food items can be stored for later service if maintained at a safe temperature. Unitized meals must be served as a complete entity and food items not consumed must be discarded or placed on a share table. Offer-versus-serve (OVS) can be used when meals are not unitized, thus producing less waste due to student selection of required food items or components for a reimbursable meal.	Less opportunities to reduce waste: Unserved hot food items must be disposed of or given away.

As the table above shows, there are tradeoffs in any decision to serve hot or cold meals to children as part of your mobile meals program. While many sponsors opt to serve only hot or cold meals in their program, keep in mind that you may opt to serve a combination of both hot and cold meals across different days, meal sites, or meal types. Be sure to fully consider all factors affecting service when developing your program.



Part Two: Best Practices for Mobile Operations

There are many options for delivering and serving mobile meals, both in terms of the vehicle(s) used and strategies to “staff up” and generate demand for your program once it is underway. Each of these factors directly affects your bottom line and represent an opportunity to seek efficiencies that support program sustainability. Successful mobile programs come in many varieties, but our interviews with sponsors have generated key considerations and best practices that are especially valuable for sponsors just getting started with this model or seeking to expand an existing program.

Vehicles and Routing

The type of vehicle needed for a mobile meals program, as well as the preferred method of procuring a vehicle for use, can vary greatly based on the organization and community profiles within which a program is conceived and developed. The following table provides key considerations to inform decision-making.

Sourcing option	May be best when your organization:
Purchase vehicle(s)²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plans to repurpose the vehicle outside of your summer program. Has sufficient start-up funds to cover the cost of purchase plus any retrofitting that may need to occur. Vehicles for purchase may be heavily discounted (i.e. retired school buses). Is comfortable with the financial/operational risk of maintaining a vehicle. Is planning to implement a long-term program.
Rent vehicle(s)³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not have sufficient startup funds to purchase a vehicle outright. Would be unlikely to repurpose the vehicle during other times of the year. Can easily stay within mileage limitations. Prefers not to carry the financial risk or operational risk of maintaining a vehicle.

² Please note that purchasing costs for vehicles are considered unallowable under [USDA guidelines](#) for the Summer Food Service Program.

³ [USDA guidelines](#) permit use of SFSP funds for vehicle rental and maintenance. However, rental agreements with an option-to-purchase represent an unallowable use of funds.

<p>Shared vehicle usage with partner organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a strong partner who is willing to allow for shared use of one or more vehicles for service during the summer months (i.e. Salvation Army relief truck, district school buses, etc.). • Can broker an agreement with an organization making regular commercial deliveries to deliver meals to support summer programming (i.e. mail trucks). • Can ensure that the vehicle is adequately maintained to meet health department sanitation requirements.
<p>Contract with driver using personal vehicle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a relationship with certified drivers who own their vehicles and are willing to deliver meals under contract using their personal vehicles. • Has dedicated volunteers or existing program staff who are willing to use their personal vehicles.

Pro Tip: Retrofitting a Purchased Vehicle

A retrofitted mobile meals vehicle provides sponsors the opportunity to expand the realm of possibility in their summer meals program and project a vision for future growth.

- Many sponsors updating a school bus for service choose to alter the interior to create a cafeteria-style environment that allows children to eat and play inside the vehicle when it is parked.
- Those with a van or truck may choose to transform the vehicle into a mobile food unit with built-in heating and refrigeration capabilities.
- Other sponsors using a van may make minimal structural investments, focusing instead on exterior branding and clearing cab space for coolers or hot boxes.
- In Garrett County, Maryland, a sponsor leveraged USDA Community Facilities and No Kid Hungry grant dollars to retrofit a trailer to serve mobile meals. The trailer includes interior seating as well as a walk-up service window to facilitate service at community locations. Since cars and small trucks are used to pull the trailer, program staff do not need a commercial driver’s license to haul the trailer between sites.

Regardless of their approach, most sponsors invest in vehicle branding. This typically takes the form of a wrap for the vehicle that includes the logo of the sponsor as well as any key partners or funders. Branding increases awareness of the program, may help with additional community-based fundraising and provides reassuring familiarity of appearance to the vehicle delivering meals to sites.

Develop Delivery Routes

When scheduling a delivery route, it is imperative to keep in mind that the time window for meal delivery to sites must be respected. Timed routes must include enough margin to avoid chronic delays and they must be efficient to justify equipment, fuel, and labor costs.

While most programs operate the same mobile route(s) each day of operation, some programs operate a different route each day of the week. Routes can take 4-6 hours to complete when providing one meal, or even

longer (6-8 hours) for programs providing two meals. The length of the route will affect fuel and staffing costs for programs that pay drivers and site monitors hourly, which is common. Routes should be carefully designed to connect sites in the most strategic way to reduce travel time between sites. A number of online routing tools are available for use.⁴

In addition, school transportation departments can provide helpful guidance in developing routes for a mobile meals program. Mobile meals routes may mirror bus routes, and school transportation officials may even be able to highlight particular pockets of need along those routes, such as mobile home parks. Be prepared to modify or refine delivery routes during the first year of the program as you figure out the most efficient means to reach children at each site and account for variable participation rates due to weather or other factors. If a site ends early during the summer while others remain in operation, this may be another opportunity to reevaluate established routes. As program needs evolve, keep in mind that sites have published windows of operation dependent upon state agency approval. Consequently, if updated delivery routes cause a change in arrival time, vehicles may need to delay service until the previously announced meal service time. Alternatively, sponsors may work with state agencies to update meal service times and publicize these changes to customers.



Part Three: Program Staffing

Hiring and training program staff and volunteers is key to the success of any summer meals program, including those that incorporate a mobile component. In addition to requiring staff training to ensure compliance with program regulations, it is important to set clear boundaries around roles and responsibilities to ensure that team members work together effectively and are empowered to take ownership of the program. Staff who understand their roles and enjoy their work are more likely to stay in their jobs, creating an environment of familiarity and trust both within the organization and among children and families participating in the program.

There are five primary staff roles involved in implementing a successful mobile meals program, as outlined in the following table: program manager, program coordinator, delivery driver, site monitor, and food service staff. Division of these roles can vary widely depending on the scale of a given program. In a small program, one staff

⁴ Two examples of online routing tools are [MyRouteOnline](#) and [Google Maps](#). No Kid Hungry does not endorse any routing tool or tools and simply provides these as examples for use; sponsors are encouraged to conduct their own research to identify routing tools that best fit their needs.

member may serve a number of roles (i.e. both coordinating the program and delivering meals). In a large program, there may be multiple staff members carrying out a single role, such as that of a site monitor.

Staff Position ⁵	Key Responsibilities
<p>Program Manager: Paid, salaried position(s) filled by staff of the sponsoring organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees startup and management of the program • Represents the program to the public, especially media and key partnerships • Manages the program budget • Hires volunteers and staff • Oversees monthly reimbursement claims submission • Conducts routine site visits and reviews • Ensures program compliance
<p>Program Coordinator: Paid, salaried position(s) filled by staff of the sponsoring organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the program manager • Manages daily logistics and operations • Conducts training for volunteers and staff • Prepares and submits monthly reimbursement claims submission • Ensures program compliance
<p>Vehicle Driver: Paid hourly and contracted for the summer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transports meals to sites along a planned and timed delivery route • Collects food storage and delivery equipment along route for return to meal prep facilities • Collects daily meal count forms from sites • May be assigned to facilitate meal service • May be assigned to ensure program compliance
<p>Site Supervisor: Paid or unpaid staff (i.e. intern) or dedicated volunteer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable for all onsite program-related activities, including meal service and associated documentation • Transmits required documentation and relevant feedback to program sponsor • Ensures site-level compliance with USDA program regulations and state and local health code regulations • May record daily participation at site using approved meal count form • May check food temperatures upon delivery and monitors food safety • Takes appropriate action if delivered meals do not arrive within a safe temperature range • Facilitates meal service • Supports site programming

⁵ An important consideration is whether one or more staff roles are unionized, which may be the case for school cafeteria staff and bus drivers. Union contracts may include regulations around hourly pay rates, work duration, or allowable work activities. The best way to identify and incorporate these variables into your program is to engage these partners early in the planning phase of your program.

<p>Site Staff: Paid or unpaid staff or dedicated volunteer(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May record daily participation at site using approved meal count form • May check food temperatures upon delivery and monitors food safety • Takes appropriate action if delivered meals do not arrive within a safe temperature range • Facilitates meal service • Supports site programming
<p>Food Service (internal prep only): varies between salaried and hourly staff or dedicated volunteers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepares meals according to established schedule • Ensures all state and local food safety guidelines are followed • Ensures all meals satisfy SFSP or National School Lunch Program (NSLP) nutrition and component requirements

Best Practices for Staffing

While early and thorough planning is the gold standard for any program, changes may occur during the summer that require you to modify your original plan. Keep in mind that as your program grows, additional staff may be needed. Additional meals translate into additional reimbursement, so be sure to explore whether program growth will be sufficient to cover additional staff hours or headcount. Conversely, if meal service projections fall well short of expectations, you may (unfortunately) need to consider whether a reduction in staff hours is necessary.

If possible, secure a group of available substitute staff (food service staff, drivers, etc.) in the event that scheduled staff are unavailable for work. Additionally, in communities where a language other than English is commonly used, recruit bilingual site monitors to broaden the scope of children and families who will feel welcome during the meal service.

When working with volunteers, consider their availability and willingness to commit to participating consistently and to travel to neighborhoods with which they may not be familiar, as well as their general passion and dedication for serving children. If your organization is seeking additional capacity to support your program, consider employing [AmeriCorps](#) members as site monitors or program coordinators.

All staff members and volunteers must receive training prior to the launch of the program (or before preparing and serving meals, if they join after the program has started). Key areas of training include:

- Program requirements for meal service and claiming (see [USDA Site Supervisor's Guide](#))
- Food safety and food distribution procedures
- Key roles and responsibilities for staff members
- Instructions for loading delivery vehicles and making deliveries
- Vendor operations (i.e. ordering, pickup, returning equipment)
- Site management

All site staff facilitating meal service must have received approved training from sponsoring staff. Reach out to your administering state agency with any questions.



Part Four: Community Considerations

Community Outreach

Creating a plan to engage children and families in your program is critical for success. Ideally, outreach will ramp up in the weeks leading up to program launch and continue at least through the first week of operation, with a follow-up outreach “push” about halfway through the summer. Consider taking a grassroots, “boots on the ground” approach to outreach that engages **local community champions** to support your cause. Sponsors regularly note that grassroots outreach is the most effective way to promote mobile summer meals programs, with “word of mouth” being the most critical.

Who Is a Local Champion?

A local champion is any respected figure in the community who takes up the cause of summer meals and endeavors to make sure all children and families know about and participate in this important program. Local champions can include parents, apartment complex managers, librarians, teachers, school administrators, clergy, or any other visible, trusted members of the community. Local champions invested in the success of your program can exert a powerful, positive influence in the following ways:

- Promoting summer meals within the community, i.e. telling other parents about the program or going door-to-door within an apartment complex to hand out flyers
- Gathering children together to visit the mobile vehicle when it arrives
- Supervising children while they eat
- Conducting program outreach and advocacy with regard to local elected officials who can further elevate the profile of summer meals within the community

Other mobile outreach ideas include going door-to-door in apartment complexes to hand out promotional flyers or place door hangers with information about the program. Be sure to coordinate with property managers when planning and conducting these canvassing activities, and consider whether volunteer labor may be appropriate for this task. You may also develop promotional business cards or flyers that include site locations for distribution at local food banks, grocery or convenience stores, laundromats, healthcare facilities, and barbershops. Distribute flyers in schools to students and parents before the end of the school year and work

with school administrators to schedule robo-calls to families with recorded messages promoting your program. Finally, take advantage of any opportunity to place notices or announcements in community newsletters or bulletins, especially in schools, churches, and other faith communities.

For more ideas and resources to promote your summer program, visit the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices website and explore our summer meals [outreach toolkit](#), which is generously supported by the Sodexo Foundation.

Pro Tip: Help Families Locate Meal Sites

One important step sponsors can take when conducting program outreach is to provide information about all the ways children and families can access information about when and where summer meals are served across an entire community, region or state. Numerous hotlines and technology platforms are available for use, including the National Hunger Clearinghouse (1-866-3-HUNGRY; 1-877-8-HAMBRE), No Kid Hungry national texting hotline (“FOOD” or “COMIDA” to 877-877) and USDA [Summer Food Rocks](#) webpage. Each of these services provides timely, confidential information to families interested in participating in the program. What’s more, promoting these services is an easy way to encourage participation at sites beyond your immediate service area. As a sponsor, you don’t have to do anything for your program to show up through these tools – site information populates automatically using publicly available USDA data.

Offering Programming

As you conduct outreach, keep in mind that one of the best ways to attract and retain children at your sites is to offer onsite **activity programming**. A [recent national survey](#) of low-income families found that after safety and meal quality, families are most interested in sites that are convenient to access and provide engaging activities. Parents also said that recreational activities and opportunities for socialization would make more children want to participate. Programming is also a great way to minimize stigma that may be associated with participation in the summer meals program, since it shifts focus from free meals to enrichment and physical activity. Onsite programming can also keep children engaged at the meal site location, making it easier for site staff to ensure that the [congregate meal requirement](#) is satisfied.

When planning outreach, keep in mind that in many communities, a wide range of organizations already provide activities to children and may be interested to pair their programming with the meals your organization provides. This may involve delivering meals to activity locations using mobile delivery methods, or these providers may propose hosting activities at one or more mobile sites. Common enrichment activities paired with meals include gardening, reading programs, tutoring, mentoring, arts and crafts, drama, nutrition education, and more.⁶ In addition, social service providers seeking opportunities for community engagement can also benefit from the opportunity to engage with families at sites to provide financial literacy classes or health screenings. Finally, consider whether mobile programming located in proximity to established social service facilities such as community health centers or WIC clinics may fill a need in the community. Regardless of the path you choose,

⁶ If your program is staffed with volunteers who are not able to stay past the scheduled meal service, the limited time available may require short activities such as worksheets or coloring sheets that can be completed at home.

make certain to reach out to these partners early and often to coordinate planning and implementation as summer approaches.

Managing Demand

Developing a system to accurately forecast demand for meals can decrease instances of over-ordering that result in cost overruns and food waste. For returning mobile programs, average participation at sites from previous years provides a helpful starting place. For new program or sites, it can be more challenging to predict the number of meals that are needed.

As a rule, meal sites tied to activity programming benefit not only from higher participation and retention rates, but also from greater day-to-day predictability in the number of meals served. If your mobile delivery lines up with an existing program, you can use historical participation or enrollment data to estimate demand.

If a new program or site is unattached to existing activities, it will not enjoy this benefit and may need to operate for a couple of weeks in a way that allows for additional flexibility. Try starting with cold meals, which can be prepared in bulk in advance, allowing you to dip into the next day's allotment or save unused meals for the next day (so long as all health and safety guidelines are followed). This strategy provides staff and program managers time to collect a few weeks of data at each site without incurring financial losses or exorbitant food waste.

In circumstances such as these, where significant fluctuations in demand may occur, consider the following as additional strategies to maximize program efficiency and minimize food waste:

- **Purchase shelf-stable food:** Many sponsors keep shelf-stable food on hand in their mobile vehicle(s) in case demand outstrips supply on any given day. This is particularly important if your program serves hot meals, as you will not have carry-over meals or meals prepared for the next day to serve. Even when hot entrées are served, the rest of the meal could be comprised of shelf stable, prepackaged items or fresh fruit and vegetables. These items can be safely used the following day.
- **Analyze average daily participation numbers daily and weekly:** By studying closely the demand for meals at each site, sponsors can better estimate how many meals will be needed on a given day of the week or under specific weather conditions. Use the daily participation numbers collected by site monitors as key insights into the trends occurring at each location and use that information to your advantage.

Evaluating and Improving

As summer ends and your program winds down, take time to reflect on your successes and identify potential areas for improvement while program details are fresh on your mind. If you developed measurable goals for the summer, check them against actual performance. This end of summer should be a time for you and your staff to be honest with yourselves about what worked well and what needs to be improved. Be intentional about convening your team as well as community partners for a constructive conversation that both celebrates “wins” while identifying shortcomings or lessons learned to inform future planning. What matters most is that you take that encouragement and critical thinking forward and generate fresh energy and ideas for next year’s program.

The end of summer is an opportunity to explore the following with your team and community partners:

- Did we reach the number of children we hoped to this summer? Why or why not?
- What did we learn this summer that can be applied to planning for next year's program?
- What feedback did we receive from the community about this program? How can we incorporate these perspectives to improve next summer? Did we seek sufficient feedback?
- Is our program financially sustainable or on a path to sustainability?
- Did our team effectively manage cost overruns and food waste? How might we improve further in these areas next summer?
- Which sites were most successful? Least successful? Do we know why these sites performed differently?
- Should our mobile meal site locations continue as mobile sites or would it make sense to transition some locations to fixed sites?
- Are there opportunities for program expansion next summer?

In the midst of evaluating your program for improvement, be sure to take time to recognize your team and community partners for all their hard work and celebrate your shared success in serving children and families through this important program.

Conclusion

Deciding how you will procure, deliver, and serve meals at sites are key milestones in the successful implementation of an effective mobile meals program. At the same time, it is crucially important to keep in mind that this work is about much more than operational logistics: for a summer meals program to succeed, sponsors must effectively engage children, families, and community partners. As you engage in final-stage planning for your mobile meals program, be sure to tap into additional resources covering program [outreach](#) and [excellence](#).